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Food waste related to the use of standards

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The following document for discussion was prepared by the delegation of Sweden in response to a request by the 2014 sessions of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards and the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables.

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Trade standards and food waste

Background

At the meeting of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables in May 2014 the Specialized Section set up a Working Group, composed of the delegations of France, Germany, Malaysia, Sweden (Rapporteur), United Kingdom and the United States, which would try to identify the reasons why the standards may cause waste.

At the meeting of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards in November 2014 the delegations exchanged views on and the way forward in addressing food waste concerns within quality standards. Food waste is an area of concern in many countries. The Working Party recommended that all specialized sections consider if this topic would be appropriate for their work. It was also suggested that, at its 2015 session, the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables start work on a limited number of products to see what issues and provisions could be addressed from the point of view of reducing waste.

Food waste in fresh fruits and vegetables is caused at all stages from production to retail as well as at the consumer stage. Since the quality requirements of supermarkets and consumers are generally higher than those set out in the standards these are a major cause of waste also at the initial sorting stage. Products rejected at the initial sorting can however often find alternative use such as processing or animal feed whereas products rejected later are often discarded. In trade standards the requirements defining the lower limit of Category II set out the limit for products that may be sold for direct human consumption whereas the requirements of Category Extra and I mainly have commercial effects in that they define the requirements of the two Categories that render a higher price for the products than cat II products.

The requirements of Category I may however influence waste to some extent since many retailing chains only sell products of Category I. You can however say that it is then not the trade standard that is the direct cause of waste since products may still be sold.

The logical measure to reduce waste related to trade standards would be to lower the requirements. However, trade standards shall reflect market requirements since their purpose is to standardize and harmonize the buyers' requirements to sellers/ suppliers. If they do not reflect market requirements they lose their major function.

Market requirements develop in a process including all parts in the production and distribution chain, but in particular retailers and consumers. Retailers put as attractive products as possible on display to attract consumers and consumers pick out the nicest looking products of the ones on display. When standards are changed to reflect a changed consumer/ retail requirement this behaviour is strengthened. So, market requirements, can to some extent be influenced.

Therefore, it may be possible to reduce the amount of products that may not be sold for fresh consumption, if there are requirements, especially in Category II, that can be either deleted or reduced, and still be acceptable to the market.

It is therefore proposed that the group goes through the standards and tries to identify possible changes in line with the reasoning above. It does not seem feasible to do all standards at once. It is instead proposed that the group looks at a limited number of standards per year and preferably standards that are looked at for other reasons in order to coordinate work.

For the coming year, it is proposed that the group looks at apples, leeks and tomatoes.